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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOMENT

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ONE of the expressions most frequently heard in these days of catchwords and high-sounding phrases is the term, "psychological moment." The term is applied to the most widely varying circumstances, from such relatively inconsequential affairs as the feeding of the baby to such momentous events as the precipitation of a World War; it is applied with equal readiness to the moment when the astute evangelist feels it proper to urge his hearers to hit the sawdust trail, and to the time when the seducer feels he may without fear of rebuff press his victim to take the first drink. No kind of human affairs appears too sacred and no kind too frivolous to be exempt from the influence of the psychological moment. As further evidence of the aptness of the term to cover a multitude of situations we find it applied to affairs in which there is no psychical factor whatever, such as a rain so timed as to save a corn-crop, or to the eruption of a geyser. From these instances we see that the term is a very useful one, playing a large part in the speech and thought of the day. True, it smacks somewhat of esotericism, but such connotation is belied by the fact that the term is not employed exclusively by savants, but is employed with equal glibness by the man of the street and even by high-school students.

Despite the popularity of the term it is likely that those who hobnob with it would be at a loss if asked to define it and give its characteristics. This is not to be wondered at, for the events that occupy such a moment are essentially psychic; they can not be touched and handled but only *felt*, and feelings are hard to describe. Most people would probably describe the moment as a time when some important issue hangs in the balance; as a time just preceding events of great consequence, when anything which is done has a serious effect upon succeeding events. An introspective account might employ such terms as "delicacy of equilibrium" and "nice adjustment of motives." It is a time when receptive and active processes are in abeyance to such an extent that we can "hear a pin drop." Then something occurs to break the tenseness, a change in action or feeling ensues and the moment is over. It has been noted in literature by Shakespeare who calls it

a tide in the affairs of men,
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.

Napoleon pointed out its importance in deciding the fate of battles:

In all battles, a moment occurs when the bravest troops . . . feel inclined to run. That terror proceeds from a want of confidence in their own courage; and it only requires a slight opportunity, a pretense, to restore confidence to them. At Arcola I won the battle with twenty-five horsemen. I seized that moment of lassitude, gave every man a trumpet, and gained the day with this handful. You see that two armies are two bodies which meet and endeavor to frighten each other; a moment of panic occurs, and that moment must be turned to advantage. When a man has been present in many actions he distinguishes that moment without difficulty; it is as easy as casting up an addition.

But so important a factor in human affairs deserves more than such passing comment. A psychic phenomenon so fraught with possibilities for action and feeling challenges serious attention and scientific analysis if we are to attain skill in controlling it.

In making a scientific classification of the states of mind that are most often accompanied by the moment we should designate them as feelingful and volitional. Examples of the former are numerous in the drama when the audience sits spell-bound through a tense scene until the climax comes, which is nothing but the psychological moment. Examples of the latter may be found when not feeling but decision and action mark the critical change. For the sake of concreteness, let us take a volitional situation in which the presence of the psychological moment is clearly to be discerned. One of the best examples is the sale, for here are found the accompaniments of the psychological moment in all their poignancy. Furthermore, the process of selling touches so intimately the experience of every one that a psychological analysis of it will have intrinsic interest apart from its value in illustrating the theoretical aspects of the psychological moment.

The psychology of the sale is a most fascinating subject and deserves more lengthy consideration than can be given here. We must content ourselves in this illustrative treatment with the statement that a sale psychologically considered is a series of progressive mental changes on the part of the buyer, leading to an act of will which culminates in satisfaction. This definition will serve for every deliberated sale, whether it involves the purchase of a stick of candy or of an automobile. The task of the salesman throughout is to develop certain states of mind on the part of the buyer, all leading to the final mental state. The act of will is our present concern. True, its adequate anal-

ysis requires a thorough study of the psychology of volition, which is beyond the scope of our present purpose, but we shall confine ourselves merely to one stage in its progress.

The first principle of voluntary action to be considered is that before such an action can occur there must be in the mind an idea or thought of the act. An idea of the end to be attained must inevitably precede the attainment of an end. For example, in such a simple act as drawing a straight line, the directness with which one reaches the end of the line depends upon the intentness with which one keeps in mind the idea of the end. It is the anticipation of the effects of an act that is the precursor of a voluntary act. Applying this principle to a sale we see that the idea of purchase must be present, hence the first task of the salesman is to inject it into the mind of the buyer. So important is this initial idea that we shall hereafter for rhetorical purposes personify It and speak of It in capitals, though the reader is warned that such practice is strictly frowned upon in orthodox psychological circles. We shall take this liberty, however, for in these days when the psychological aspects of business operations are only dimly recognized we should be pardoned if we state things with slightly bizarre effect, in our efforts to show their importance. But apart from such claims to anthropomorphism, the Idea is important enough on other grounds to deserve capitalization, for sometimes It is able to set off our actions almost automatically. Through a kind of action technically known as "dynamogenesis," It occasionally passes over into action immediately and many sales occur without the exertion of any effort on the part of a salesman. For example, the Idea, "baseball score" is strong enough in its own right to lead us without further locution of thought, to reach into our pocket for a coin and buy a paper. Such a purchase is so shorn of voluntary characteristics as not to furnish us with an illustration of the psychological moment. But not all sales are of this "hair-trigger" type, and most Ideas even though carefully implanted in the mind do not lead directly to purchase but require manipulation. Indeed such is the case with all our deliberative sales, and an analysis of the fortunes of the Idea will lead us to our goal, the psychological moment.

The word analysis is used advisedly, for it indicates the true condition of affairs, namely, that at time of a sale there is more than one Idea in mind; there are many ideas there, each one potential of initiating appropriate action, and if any single purchase is to be consummated the corresponding Idea must be strengthened and the other ideas, eliminated. Accordingly, we see that in psychological terms the problem in making a sale is to strengthen

the central Idea in the mind of the buyer. How this may be done is a tale full of dramatic situations. Take, for example, the sale of an automobile. The buyer enters the salesroom already inoculated with the Idea of purchase. But, alas, he comes with many other ideas in his mind at the same time. He has, for example, an idea as to how his bank account will be depleted if he purchases a car; on the other hand, he has an idea of the pleasures which attach to motoring. Again, in addition to the Idea of this particular Car he has ideas about several other cars—lower-case *i* and *c* this time—which he has examined or intends to examine. All these ideas and many others throng upon his mental field until if it were graphically represented it would resemble a full-moon containing a central circle, freckled with numerous circlets of different sizes representing the ideas with their different strengths. It will be seen that these ideas bear different relationships to the central idea, some being hostile, others sympathetic. Whether they hinder or help they must be reckoned with and must be manipulated to the glory of the Idea, which must be nourished and expanded to such a degree that its bulk will crowd out all the other ideas. This task of nourishment confronts every salesman; indeed, from the psychological standpoint the salesman is not a vender of automobiles but a manipulator of ideas. His task is to fan the flame of the Idea until it becomes to the buyer the consuming interest in life. Beside it, everything must shrink to nothingness—the about-to-be-ravaged bank-account, the heart-rending burden of upkeep, the mortgage on the house, last year's unpaid coal-bill—all must be forgotten in the overpowering compulsion of the Idea. And the Idea must remain the greatest thing in the world long enough for the purchaser to sign his check or sign the pay-as-you-use contract.

To a superficial view the task of the salesman might seem to be that of taking hold of these unwelcome ideas and thrusting them into outer darkness, but such a conception is erroneous and will lead to egregious error. If the mind of the buyer contains the idea of another car the proper procedure is not to dilate negatively upon that car in the effort to drive it out of his mind. Every word uttered about that car acts as food for the unwelcome idea and causes it to wax larger and larger. The practise of criticizing or condemning a rival commodity is being recognized as poor business ethics, but we may go still farther and say that to speak either in praise or blame of rival goods is poor psychology, for every word makes the undesired idea still more troublesome.

What are the methods, then, by which the undesirable ideas

may be forced out of the mind and the desired one enhanced? The answer is to force all attention upon It and when this happens, the strength of the undesired ideas automatically decreases. The psychological situation may become clearer when described in terms of brain energy. The brain, according to some psychologists, is organized into a number of ideational systems, one for each idea that exists in the mind. Any ideational system may be roused into action by the drainage into it of brain energy. Now the energy of the brain may be distributed in various amounts over different systems, the amount in each system depending upon the strength of the corresponding idea. In the case of our sale, if the main Idea is to grow in strength its brain-system must drain off from the other systems the brain energy resident within them until the energy of the brain is all drained off into the one system, which means the triumph of the Idea.

Reverting to our psychological description of the sale, we might pause at this stage and elaborate upon methods of strengthening the Idea, but that would require a digression from our main interest—the psychological moment. Suffice it to say the process consists in using concrete material with which to embellish the Idea. The salesman must dilate upon the specific virtues of the car, upon the power and smoothness of the engine, the luxurious ease of the springs, the elegance of the upholstery; then he must attach as allies to the Idea, the subsidiary ideas that lurk sympathetically in the background of the mind of the buyer, showing how the car may be used to transport oneself and family to sylvan spots, how it may assist one to radiate an air of prosperity, and the like. And with each increment added to the strength of the Idea there is a corresponding diminution in the strength of the undesirable ideas until finally they all dwindle away, and the Idea is left with undisputed sway.

But we have been moving too rapidly in our description, and have passed over the magic moment. It comes just before the Idea bursts forth into action, when there is only a vestige of a contradictory idea making a last valiant stand against annihilation. And what a desperately uncertain period it is, and how the soul of the salesman is wrung with anguish! Though outwardly calm, he is inwardly consumed with anxiety. Will the carefully nourished Idea be powerful enough to rout its last bold opponent or will some hostile idea by a sudden sally pierce its none too sound armor? He realizes also the extreme delicacy of the moment and prays heartily that no untoward stimulus may arise to disrupt the delicate balance of brain-

energy. He knows from bitter experience how small a thing may destroy his work. He has seen many an "otherwise perfectly good sale" lost because of an empty fountain-pen, a telephone call, a baby's cry, an accident in the street. Anything, however unrelated to the commodity, may spoil the sale. Any salesman can describe a score of such catastrophes which make him assert that the psychological moment is the most critical stage in the sale. And he does not overstate the fact. The experience of sales managers goes to show that the salesmen who fail are deficient most frequently in ability to get past the psychological moment. They make a good approach, arouse interest in the goods and create strong desire, but are unable to make a good closing. They err in two ways—in trying to force a decision too soon, before the Idea has had time to reach its maximum dimensions, or in delaying to press for a decision until after the Idea has ripened and decayed. In either case, their error lies in a failure to recognize the psychological moment.

How may one recognize the psychological moment and how may one cultivate a sensitiveness for its approach? Undoubtedly there are signs that accompany it, for successful salesmen sense it readily. Their awareness of it, however, is not a vividly self-conscious matter, for they can not tell how they recognize it. If pressed for a description of their method, they would probably say, by intuition, and this may serve as well as any other word. But the process of intuition may be further analyzed and is found to be a process of conscious apprehension through sense avenues which we all possess. Many of the things that warn of the approach of the moment in the sale are small involuntary movements on the part of the buyer, such as slight inclinations of the head and trunk, minute contractions and relaxations of bodily muscles. Even so slight a change as that in the size of the pupil of the eye may serve to indicate to the practised salesman that the portentous moment has arrived. Other more obvious signs may consist of verbal responses of the buyer, for the skilful salesman does not do all the talking in engineering a sale; instead he throws out frequent feelers in the form of questions, and by the warmth of the response, can judge how nearly a decision has been reached. A hundred cues such as these are present and are automatically used by the expert salesman in regulating his conduct when the moment arrives.

Upon recognizing the moment what steps may the salesman take to see that it is passed most auspiciously? Our psychological analysis just completed will suggest several steps that

may be taken to increase the chances of success. One measure of prime importance is to stage the sale so that there will be no disturbances while it is in progress; for we have seen that every disturbance, no matter how trivial, means the introduction of a new idea into the mind of the buyer and a dislodgment of the balance of brain energy. In view of such danger the salesman should carefully isolate his buyer and separate him from things and people. This is the great psychological advantage of using a hotel show-room.

Another prophylactic measure is to have conditions favorable for immediate consummation of the sale. There must be no awkward delay when the moment arrives. The contract should be ready and the writing utensils at hand. All should move as smoothly as a theatrical performance. Indeed, a sale in many ways resembles a drama and should be rehearsed with equal propriety.

As a third way of meeting the moment the following plan may be recommended: Assume that the sale is made—that the purchaser has decided to buy; and this will be true if the salesman has judged the moment rightly. He might indicate that he knows the decision has been made by the wording of his next remark: Which color of upholstery do you prefer? or, Do you wish immediate delivery? Or sometimes, his remarks should be so put as to commend the decision which he knows has been made. Careful observation will show that many purchasers, after having made up their minds, really desire to be talked to for a while in order to hear their choice justified; so very often, such a line of talk is the best accompaniment to the psychological moment.

This brief attempt to characterize the psychological moment has shown that it is a common phenomenon of mental life; that whenever it occurs, it marks a time of great importance in human affairs; that it is a period of very delicate equilibrium to be met with great sagacity and cunning. By means of our homely illustration taken from the everyday business of selling, we have seen that in spite of the occult connotation of the term, the phenomenon is not a miracle to be controlled by a few gifted initiates possessing mysterious powers of divination, but that it is a natural occurrence resulting from a clash of ideas under important circumstances; that it exhibits itself in observable changes in human behavior, readily apparent to any one who will study them. To one who thus recognizes the presence of this interesting psychological phenomenon and seeks to understand it, is given a new conception of the significance of human behavior and a vision of far-reaching possibilities of influencing and controlling it.